

BLACK

VELVET

A Novel by Monique van Braak

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For Robert
You unknowingly were a huge inspiration.

And Yvonne
Thank you for everything.

This book would not have been here without
you.

CHAPTER

ONE

June, 7th, 1994.

The city was drenched with rain that had come down over the past weeks, with no sign of it letting up. Even the weather-guy, who was always optimistic, had turned pessimistic about the rain. “Welcome to the UK, idiot,” Alannah mumbled, “land of rain. Land of clouds. Get over it.” She was on her way to work in Black Velvet, her beloved Ford Anglia, listening to the radio, but only because she had forgotten to put a new tape in her cassette player. The weather-guy let out a last sigh before the DJ resumed playing the crappy hip-hop music that had been putting her in a terrible mood ever since she turned on the radio. The knob to change channels had broken off years ago, she had tried to fix it but never with any luck. Alannah therefore

gave up on it and rummaged through her pile of tapes every morning before leaving for work.

Today she had forgotten. The cat had wanted his extra bit of attention, which had distracted her from her regular morning routine and basically, it turned everything to hell. She didn't blame Prince, though. He was her best friend, her life companion. She had found him in the gutters in London when he was just a few weeks old and had immediately sympathised with that tiny black ball of fur. He had scratched the skin off her hands when she picked him up and took him home, but she didn't care. She had fallen in love and was determined to take care of this kitten. She named him Prince, after her favourite musician. When Prince realised he had found his forever home with Alannah, he had started to follow her around everywhere she went in the house. Every morning she struggled to keep him inside, London was far too busy for a cat, especially *her* cat.

The car in front of her suddenly stopped. Alannah, lost in day-dreaming, hit the brakes as quick as she could and managed to stop with only centimetres between the nose of her Black Velvet and the car in front of her. She cursed the London rush hour traffic under her breath and slid her sunglasses down on her nose. She didn't care how

cloudy it was- it was always too bright. She preferred the darkness of her home. Heavy crimson curtains covering the windows from ceiling to floor, not letting a glimmer of light slip through. Someone once suggested that she might be oversensitive to light, which she knew she wasn't. She simply didn't like it. Or maybe she just wanted to disagree with people. She hadn't entirely figured that out yet.

June, 8th, 1994.

Alannah felt something soft brush against her face as she was trying to remain asleep. Prince softly meowed in her ear and proceeded to lick her cheek. "Prince... it's way too early. You know that," she mumbled to the cat while opening her eyes to check the time. 4:38 AM. She sighed, and gave Prince a quick scratch on his head before rolling over onto her other side. Prince was quick to follow and settled in next to her, purring loudly. She smiled. That cat was possibly the only good thing in her life. Besides Black Velvet, of course. She tried to get back to sleep, but the encounter with Prince had left her wide awake.

Her thoughts drifted to Daniel, her brother, whom she had lost when she was only eight years old. Daniel had been her light at the end of a pitch

black tunnel. He was the only one who had actually cared about her. Her mother had hated her and ignored her most of the time, her father hated her too, yet instead of ignoring, he abused her. Her sister.. Well. Her sister. She had been a nasty piece of work, her mom's favourite and she would always make sure that all trouble would fall on Alannah. She let out a sigh. "Daniel..." She always wondered about what their life would have been like had he not died. And each time she did, she came up with a different version. The only thing all versions had in common was that they were all happy. Absentmindedly, she had been scratching Prince all over. Daniel had always loved cats. Would Prince have liked him? She could never know for sure, but she liked to imagine they would get along just fine. Prince had gotten up and pushed his face against her cheek. She could feel his purring on her skin and closed her eyes for a second, she loved it when he did that. Prince only did that when she cried. She quickly wiped away her tears and looked up at the ceiling, where over a hundred tiny glow in the dark stars were glowing faintly. It was something the previous tenant had left behind in her apartment, but she hadn't cared about them being there. However, lately she had found them to be strangely comforting. She closed

her eyes, listened to Prince's purring and slowly drifted back to sleep.

When she woke up again, she didn't even bother to check the time. She knew right away that it would be 'one of those nights', and that only a few minutes had passed since she had fallen asleep. She grunted and got out of bed. She walked toward the kitchen, took a tub of strawberry yogurt from the fridge, a spoon from the drawer and curled up in her giant chair. Prince had followed her and sat like a Sphinx on the armrest of the chair, watching her eat her yogurt. "You can look at me all you want, buddy, but you're not getting any of this and you know it." Prince let out a soft meow and started washing his feet. It felt like time was going by slower than a snail would cross the road. She sat there, waiting for morning, until her alarm went off.

When Alannah heard her alarm go off, she got up from her chair and took the pack of cigarettes that lay on the coffee table. Since she'd had Prince, she had never smoked inside anymore. Instead, she went onto the balcony to smoke with Prince safely locked inside the apartment. When she was done, she shivered, it was surprisingly chilly outside. This wasn't a strange phenomenon, but in June, it would normally be a bit warmer than

today. Quickly, she went back inside and scratched Prince on his head, who was waiting for her at the door, pushing himself against her bare legs. She turned on the coffee maker and went into her bedroom to put on her black jeans, her band t-shirt and her checkered button-up shirt which she left unbuttoned. Her clothing usually didn't change much per day, just the print on her t-shirt or the colour of her button-up shirt. She rummaged through the pile of cassette tapes on her desk and picked one from Elton John, with a collection of his greatest hits. After that, she poured her coffee in her travel mug, fed Prince, scratched him behind his ears, grabbed her coat and went out the door, off to work.

Alannah worked at a bar, but they would always open up for lunchtime because a lot of office people in the neighbourhood would come there to eat, which meant she had to be there rather early to prepare for lunch time. There had to be a set amount of freshly prepared sandwiches ready to be sold, and this week she had pulled the short straw, which meant she had to show up early to prepare them. She didn't mind. Most importantly, it brought some extra money to her paycheck, but she also enjoyed cooking and preparing food, so

preparing these sandwiches was not a very big deal for her. "Oi, Whiskers!"

"Jeremy!" Alannah called out when she heard the voice of her best friend. "What are you doing here?" Jeremy grinned. "Just wanted to say hi and see how you're doing."

"I am okay, didn't sleep much but I'm starting to get used it," she told him. He had known about her insomnia for as long as she could remember. She never even told him, one day, he had just figured it out himself.

"Ah... sorry to hear that, Whiskers," he said. "Are you okay otherwise?" She nodded and took off the uncomfortable plastic gloves she had to wear when preparing food. She walked over to the bar and leaned over it, looking at Jeremy. "Coffee?"

"Yep, the usual"

Alannah went over to the coffee machine, and looked at Jeremy while she was preparing his coffee. His tall and slender posture had always stood out to her. She had often told him he was good looking, but he'd never have it. His chestnut-brown hair was tied together low in his neck and his green eyes always had that sparkle. With the coffee, she headed back towards him and put the cup on the bar. "Enjoy, gorgeous," she said, playfully. He grinned and blushed slightly. "Oh,

shut it, you.” She laughed and turned away to prepare herself a coffee as well. She brushed some cat hairs of her pant-leg. “Damn it, Prince... How many times have I told you not to sleep on my clothes...” Jeremy caught that. “The kitten again?”

She nodded, and laughed. “He’s the best, really, but his sleeping on my clothes is driving me up the walls.”

“Tali does that too, you know. Every morning I am brushing her fur off my shirts. You’re lucky you’ve got a black cat and black clothes, but considering Tali is white...”

“Must be a cat-thing,” Alannah replied, grinning. “As long as he keeps me company, I can forgive him.”

Jeremy nodded. “They sure are great companions,” he said, stirring his coffee. Jeremy would always look at her intensely when he worried about her, and he was doing it right now.

“Jer...” Alannah sighed.

“I can see there’s something going on with you, Whiskers.”

“I’m fine, Jer.”

“If you say so...”

“Shouldn’t you be at work by now?” She wasn’t trying to get him out of the bar, but she knew he had been late because of interrogating her

before and she wasn't going to let that happen again. Besides, she had her sandwiches to finish.

"Hmhm... I best head out. See you tomorrow night?"

She nodded. "Yep. I'm off at seven."

"Eight at your place," he decided.

She nodded again. "See you then!"

Jeremy grabbed his coffee cup and raised his hand to wave at her before leaving the bar.

After Alannah finished preparing the sandwiches, she opened the door for lunch. She had known Jeremy for most of her life. They had met on their first day of school, and had been inseparable since. When they were younger, he would come to her house nearly every day to hang out, but also to escape his own home. They had quickly grown a very strong bond that lasted for over twenty years now.

June, 9th, 1994

"Yo, Whiskers!" Jeremy called out for Alannah as she was leaving work. He had been off work early and decided to wait for Alannah at the parking lot behind the bar. Alannah looked up to see him casually leaning against her car, jacket open, messy hair and with his usual grin on his face, waving at her. She raised her hand, while

fishing her keys from her deep camouflage jacket's pockets.

"Need a ride, gorgeous?"

"Yes please," he replied, his grin widening. Even though Jeremy had a car, he hardly ever drove it. He hated the London traffic, and could get from his place to work on foot easily. The only time he would drive was when he left the city, which had happened once in the past five years. Alannah had driven his Toyota for a few years when her Anglia had been badly damaged and she couldn't afford to get it fixed. Now that it was fixed, Jeremy's Toyota was sitting in his garage, collecting dust. "You really should drive more often, you know," Alannah said, "that poor Toyo of yours must feel like it's not good enough for you by now."

She had unlocked the driver's side door and got in to unlock the passenger door, where Jeremy was waiting.

"Oh, I know," he replied, "but driving in the city is way too much of a hassle. And don't even get me started on rush hour!"

Alannah laughed. "Oh come on, that car of yours is small enough to fit on the bike lane."

Jeremy let out a roaring laugh and fastened his seatbelt while Alannah was putting the keys in the ignition.

“Take out or cooking?” she asked him, but she already knew his answer.

“Take out. Pizza, to be more precise.”

She nodded, grinning. “As expected. Usual place?”

Jeremy nodded.

When they arrived at Alannah’s place, she grabbed two cans of beer from the fridge. Jeremy had been carrying both pizzas and placed them on the counter.

“Gosh, that salami smell is strong enough to wake up all the neighbourhood dogs,” Alannah complained. Jeremy knew she hated salami and its smell, but he couldn’t help but love it.

Jeremy grinned in response, and took one of the beers Alannah had placed on the kitchen counter. “Where’s that furball of yours?” he asked.

“Probably on my bed, napping,” Alannah replied, peeking around the bedroom door.

“Princy-boy, where are you?” A soft meow coming from the bed was the response. “Come on over, boy, it’s dinner time for you as well,” she said, leaning forward to scratch him between his ears.

He followed her to the pantry where she kept the cat-food, and after that to his bowl. He waited for Alannah to finish filling up his bowl before he started eating.

“It is beyond me how you managed that, Whiskers, Tali would eat my hand if she got the chance.”

“I don’t know, it’s something he’s always done,” Alannah shrugged. “I guess Prince is better behaved than Tali,” she continued with a grin as she walked toward her stereo to put on some music. Next to her extensive cassette collection, she also had a lot of vinyl. She grabbed her favourite from the top of the pile, Prince’s ‘Purple Rain’ and put it on the record player, humming along to the music as she headed toward the kitchen counter to grab her pizza before falling into her giant armchair. Jeremy was in his favourite spot on the ugly, yet very comfortable couch that Alannah had bought for ten quid at the secondhand store. She had planned on re-upholstering at some point, but she never got to it and now she just didn’t care about it anymore.

She opened her can of beer, took a big gulp and took out her cigarettes. “Be back in a bit,” she said to Jeremy, holding up her cigarette. He simply nodded in reply as Alannah went onto the balcony.

Her apartment was on the fourteenth floor of a high-rise tower block, which gave her a brilliant view of the city whenever she went out to smoke. The sun was already starting to set and bathed London in its golden glow. She flipped her sunglasses down from her head to her nose, and enjoyed the view.

Back inside, Prince had found Jeremy and settled in in his lap. Alannah smiled at how carefully he was stroking Prince's back, Prince purring loudly. She fell down in her armchair and took a piece of her cheese pizza, handing Jeremy his can of beer, since Prince's presence had left him unable to move.

"You know, you could hand me pizza, Whiskers," he said.

"Prince will steal it before you get the chance to have a bite," she replied before taking a bite of her slice.

Jeremy let out a slight growl and took a gulp of his beer.

"Did you guys get any good books in at the store this week?" Alannah asked Jeremy.

"Yeah," he replied, "ran into some good thrillers. Put a couple copies aside for you, you can pick them up tomorrow."

"Brilliant."

“I already applied my employee discount.”
“Even better.”

Jeremy shooed Prince off his lap and took a slice of pizza. Prince remained hovering between the two of them, expecting a piece of meat from Jeremy’s pizza. He knew by now Alannah never had meat on her pizza, so Jeremy was always his first target when trying to acquire a bite. He always succeeded, and tonight was no exception. After minutes of begging and meowing, Jeremy finally gave in and gave Prince a tiny piece of salami, just enough to keep him satisfied.

June 12th, 1994

The past couple of nights had been horrible for Alannah. She had had a lot of nightmares, causing her to wake up bathing in sweat and sometimes even screaming. They were always about the past, and often about the day Daniel died. Alannah had been just eight years old, but she remembered the day like it had happened yesterday. Daniel had decided to take a bath at night, told Alannah he needed some time on his own for a while. She had understood, and let him be in the bathroom. When two hours had passed and Daniel still hadn’t come out, Alannah had instinctively known something was wrong. She